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ABSTRACT

The increasing trend toward specialization in education and reasons why corporations need college graduates educated in the liberal arts are discussed. Individuals are needed by corporations with a broad cultural background and high cognitive capacity for problem-solving and for perceiving profit-taking within the context of moral principles and social values. Employees are needed who are capable of sustained intellectual growth who will be able to adjust the policies of the corporation to the changing circumstances of the later twentieth century, and who will be able to communicate with their counterparts in other countries. Corporations should recruit a fixed percentage of new employees from among the various fields of liberal arts, or, at the very least, insure that an appropriate mix of specialists and generalists are recruited. Problems faced by undergraduate and graduate level liberal arts programs and the corporate obligation to financially support higher education, particularly undergraduate liberal arts programs, as well as the research in the humanities and human sciences are discussed. Arguments for liberal arts study that have been presented throughout history are noted. Members of the board of directors, board of advisors, and staff officers of the Council for Financial Aid to Education, Inc., are also listed. (SW)

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The Perils of Specialization or Why Corporations Should Support The Liberal Arts

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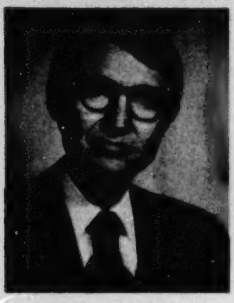

DR. JOHN SAWHILL, president of New York University, is well qualified to discuss the importance of the liberal arts to the business community. His credentials include successful careers in business and government as well as in higher education. After graduating cum laude from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, he earned a Ph.D. in economics, finance and statistics from NYU's Graduate School of Business Administration. He developed his business skills in executive positions at Merrill, Lynch, Pierce, Fenner and Smith in New York, the Commercial Credit Company in Baltimore and the Washington-based management-consulting firm of McKinsey and Company. Appointed associate director for Natural Resources, Energy and Science in the U.S. Office of Budget and Management in 1972, he was named Federal Energy Administrator a year later. In 1975, at the age of 39, he became president of NYU, where he is also a professor of economics and the first incumbent of the newly established David B. Kriser Professorship in the Humanities. This booklet is an expansion of a presentation Dr. Sawhill made to the CFAE Board of Directors which both its corporate and academic members felt deserved far wider circulation.

November 1978

The Perils of Specialization or Why Corporations Should Support The Liberal Arts

We find ourselves in the late 1970s in a situation where education is becoming more specialized and technical as the problems of modern life are becoming more complex. There is superficially a logic to this progression, but it is finally spurious logic. It will not work because the problems which are bearing down on us—urban, environment and energy problems—are all interrelated and multidimensional. Most important, they all have a large social component. No mere technician can hope to solve them; they can only be approached from a deeply humanistic perspective.

The liberal arts curriculum is the formal way we have devised over a period of centuries to instruct college men and women in the humanistic tradition—the means by which literature, philosophy, history and science are disseminated throughout educated society. The liberal arts comprise the best that has been written and thought about ethical and moral conduct, aesthetic values and civic virtue in the West since Plato.

The institutional leadership of the coming decades therefore must be made up of men and women schooled in the liberal arts to recognize and work with complex social problems, problems which very directly and intimately affect the way we are all going to be living in the near future. Government officials, businessmen, foundation executives, churchmen and managers in every sphere of life must increasingly operate in an unprecedented, much broader context. Only those men and women who can articulate societal goals in a wide political, economic and moral perspective will be able to provide appropriate leadership as the social parameters of decision-making expand and the repercussions of wrong decisions grow more severe and irreversible. The narrowly educated may know how to maximize profits, compute valences and increase cost efficiency, but they will not know how to allocate resources in anticipation of social change, how to foster creative work environments, or how to join in imaginative cooperation with their peers in other lands.

The only way to assure that the wisest and most far-sighted policies are made by managers and supervisors at every level is to rely on the best people. The "best," in most cases, however, does not mean the ever-larger annual legions of narrowly trained accountants, tax lawyers, school administrators, dentists and welfare workers currently being disgorged by our institutions of higher learning. It means those most deeply and thoughtfully educated in the humanist tradition. A thin patina of liberal arts slapped on the Managerial Man or Woman is not enough. Culture is not a condiment with which to perk up lawyers and bureaucrats at cocktail parties. It is not an embellishment but an absolute necessity if we as a society are to get our priorities right. What more catastrophic prescription for chaos in this country in the coming decades than to train up a generation of business executives, political managers and leaders of the learned professions who lack a common recollection of a usable past and a capacity to communicate with one another through a shared medium of humanistic ideas?

The Corporate Need

If our society is to avoid this kind of leadership, then corporation executives must insist that graduates in law and business and other professional fields come to their companies not only with writing and computational skills but also with a broad cultural background and high cognitive capacity for problem-solving and for perceiving profit-taking within the context of moral principles and social values. Thereby they will assure themselves of employees who have a developed conceptual capacity and can perceive the significance of their work in a broad intellectual and moral context; of employees with a well developed ethical and social sense; and of employees capable of sustained intellectual growth who will be able to adjust the policies of the corporation to the inevitable altered circumstances of the later twentieth century. They will also assure themselves, in a world of increasing international bonding,

of employees with a capacity to communicate with their counterparts in other countries. And, not of least importance, they will greatly help secure the future leadership of this country into the hands of men and women of culture and humanity, a situation which alone may give us a reasonable chance of weathering the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

Today's corporate recruiting practices tend to reflect the specialization which has characterized undergraduate education in the '70s—accounting, in part, for the difficulty that liberal arts majors are having in finding corporate positions. Perhaps, to reverse this trend, senior corporate officers should insist that their personnel departments annually recruit a fixed percentage of new employees from among liberal arts graduates who have degrees in literature, history and philosophy, with the conviction that from among these imaginative and reflective young people will come many of the best leaders of the future in the corporate world. At the very least, these senior executives should monitor their hiring practices to insure that they are recruiting an appropriate mix of specialists and generalists.

The Best Argument

The best argument for the liberal arts as the necessary core of all education remains that of critic, poet and state education official Matthew Arnold, writing in England in the late 1860s. He saw in such education the means of the "bringing into one harmonious and truly human life, of the whole body of . . . society."

If we cannot understand each other, if we are not operating within the same frame of reference, we cannot mitigate the forces of division and our society must perforce be pulled apart. In a world where racial and ethnic tensions persist, where inflation and unemployment continue to defy the theories of the best economists and the efforts of the most vigorous statesmen, where the energy base of our technology

may stand in grave jeopardy, our social harmony and public peace are doomed if we cannot see these problems through the refraction of a common culture. When we face each other over the bargaining table or in the committee room, there is little time for the adversaries to establish a common identity or a mutual authentication of motives and ideas. This identity must be established beforehand—and it can only be done through a common education in the liberal arts.

It would be overoptimistic to anticipate that this common culture will produce a consensus in our society leading to resolution of the grave problems that press upon us. But this caution should not allow us the luxury of believing for a moment that we can solve complex problems without the common culture and integrative frame of reference and discourse that a liberal arts education affords.

Training Political Leaders

Arnold's is not the only argument for the liberal arts that remains relevant today. The classical case is also not without force and meaning. Roman philosopher and attorney Marcus Tullius Cicero suggested a correlation between the lofty behavior and policies of Roman leaders and their training in and devotion to "literary studies." He further stressed that the literary arts could provide pleasure and comfort for each man, no matter what his worldly fortunes. "Reading . . . stimulates the young and diverts the old, increases one's satisfaction when things are going well, and when things are going badly provides a refuge and solace."

Indeed the history of both the earlier and later twentieth century has made Cicero's arguments, considered in proper perspective, all the more compelling. One of the great failures of modern society has been in the realm of political leadership, and this failure is still a deficiency that we perceive on all sides. A thorough grounding in the liberal arts and

their ethical orientation will not necessarily assure enlightened statesmanship, but I would argue that we will be much more secure with leaders who have such a background.

As we enter the last quarter of the twentieth century, we can reassert the private as well as the public argument in Cicero's case for the liberal arts with heightened conviction. Some gloomy futurists warn us that we are facing the prospect of severe technological downturns. Those more sanguine suggest that what lies ahead is a slowdown in economic growth or at least a need for some life-style changes. In either case, the era of the runaway, energy-intensive, mass-consumption society may well have had its day. In turn, we may need to adjust to a less mobile, more quiet life, one well suited to rediscovery of the pleasures and comforts of literature and contemplative thought. If, on the other hand, current prognostications prove wrong and technology continues to provide us with its labor-saving, time-saving miracles, the amount of leisure time at the disposal of the average man and woman will expand. Assuming that television does not usurp every waking moment, literature may once again come into its own.

Understanding Modern Man

A subtle argument for the value of humanistic studies was presented in fifteenth century Florence by Pico della Mirandola, a philosophy professor and public relations man for the Medici merchant princes and politicians. Man is the most complex and "wonderful" link in the Great Chain of Being by which everything in the universe finds its place and purpose within a Divine Plan, Pico said. The humanities allow us to understand human nature; thereby we can understand all nature; therefore the humanities are the most critically important of all studies—without them, we cannot really understand anything else.

Pico's case for the liberal arts appears particularly relevant today. In the last ten years or so, and with

greater intensity each year, contemporary research in molecular and cell biology has again suggested the vision of man as microcosmically integrated with the rest of nature. Through understanding man's body, as well as his psyche, we may come to understand the meaning of life in all nature.

Several decades of research in behavioral psychology have raised second thoughts about the claim that there is no scientific base for humanism. Behaviorism does detract from the traditional humanistic conception of man's autonomy and his capacity for freedom of choice, as Pavlov's contemporary disciple, B.F. Skinner, has stressed. Human behavior is seen at least partly subject to the same kind of environmental conditioning as characterizes other forms of organic behavior. Therefore, understanding human nature, as Pico said, provides insight into all nature.

Through our university science forums and seminars we must try to insure that the new regard for discovery in the natural sciences goes beyond shallow applause or opprobium towards a genuine understanding. For it is imperative that the humanists not reject scientific advance because of the many alarms sounded by those who retain an Orwellian mistrust of science and technology—those who see only the nightmares. Nuclear energy and DNA research, to name but two of the currently controversial issues, must not be banished simply to appease the reflexive nay-sayers who look upon the discoveries of the laboratory only with dread, exaggerating the perils and ignoring the promise. Self-styled vigilantes and inquisitors must not create a climate of opinion in which some new Galileo is silenced and thwarted. It is largely up to the universities to insure that courageous research into physical and physiological processes can be carried forward.

Liberal Arts in Trouble

Today, the liberal arts are in serious trouble at both the undergraduate and the graduate level. The under-

graduate faculties, traditionally the heart and soul of a university, have become demoralized. Their purpose is in question; they are suffering from a massive loss of prestige and funds; and undergraduates are abandoning liberal arts disciplines and turning in growing numbers to technical and professional education.

Between 1971 and 1976, the percentage of undergraduate degrees awarded in English and literature fell by 38 percent; in mathematics by 35 percent; in the foreign languages by 22 percent. Overall the number of students majoring or concentrating in the traditional humanities has recently dropped from 9 to 5 percent while enrollment in the social sciences has fallen off even more dramatically from 18 to 8 percent. In contrast, the professional schools are booming, with enrollment soaring from 38 to 58 percent of all undergraduate students. Traditionally, professional training succeeded and capped the attainment of a baccalaureate; today, it has become a shortcut into and out of the university. The liberal arts offer no jobs, so who cares about them?

Graduate liberal arts programs face equally daunting problems. Young Ph.D.s holding degrees in literature or history are facing dismal job prospects, both within the university, where they appear redundant, and within society at large, where their degrees may actually become liabilities once they enter the job market.

Fortunately the astonishing vitality of the liberal arts through the centuries has always been shown by the capacity of the humanities to renew themselves. Just when they appear to be hopelessly obsolete in content, flaccid in inspiration, dreadfully turgid in style, there is a great revival, as the liberal arts absorb the results of recent scientific discoveries and extrapolate from novel perceptions of nature and human behavior a reconstructed image of humanity.

We appear now to be capable of such a moment of

renaissance in the humanities, of revitalization of the liberal arts, of restoration of these ideas and writings to the central place in our educational systems and our culture. It is a renaissance that today's imaginative corporate leaders should be proud and anxious to share in.

The Corporate Obligation

In addition to rethinking entry-level qualifications, corporate executives have a second and equally important role to play in shaping the future of our universities—corporate giving. They must not leave the fiscal solvency of our universities and colleges solely in the hands of federal and state bureaucrats, necessarily sensitive to the votes of large constituencies of the aging, the poor and the sick, and thereby inclined, whatever their degree of enlightenment, to give lesser priority to funding of higher education.

Our great corporations must invest in the future of higher education, for it is their own future as well. They should set aside a fixed proportion of their annual profits as gifts to colleges and universities, particularly to support the development of undergraduate liberal arts programs as well as the research in the humanities and human sciences that may serve directly to enrich our knowledge of human beings.

At present, the corporate investment in education is disappointing. Last year—1977—total corporate contributions to education amounted to $610 million. Yet, if only 2 percent of last year's corporate profits had been given to higher education, the amount would have risen to a very substantial $3.4 billion. Business executives must have the courage to face their boards to propose greatly increased corporate investment in the social fund of higher education. This alone can secure a future in which business will continue to function effectively and freely.

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The Council for Financial Aid to Education (CFAE)

CFAE, a nonprofit service organization, promotes increased voluntary support of higher education by all sources, but especially by the corporate community.

CFAE was founded in 1952 by five prominent business leaders, the chairmen of United States Steel, General Motors, Exxon, Container Corporation and Armstrong Cork. The chairmen were Irving S. Olds, Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., Frank W. Abrams, Walter P. Paepcke and Henning W. Prentis.

CFAE staff members call personally upon hundreds of top-echelon businessmen every year to explain the financial needs of higher education and to enlist corporate support in meeting them. CFAE also conducts seminars and offers counseling services for corporate and college administrators. It publishes an annual report on voluntary support received by colleges and universities, an annual report on corporate support of higher education, special studies in fields related to educational philanthropy, "how to . . ." manuals and other materials designed to broaden the base of educational support.

CFAE sponsors the nationwide public service advertising campaign, "Give to the college of your choice," through the Advertising Council. This campaign has elicited as much as $34 million worth of free time and space from the media in a single year.

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